Please cite the Published Version

Publisher: Manchester Metropolitan University, Centre for Learning and Teaching

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/635406/

Additional Information: This article originally appeared in Learning and Teaching in Action Journal

Learning and Teaching in Action

Harkin, B. (2021). Academic Readiness and Collaborative Communities in Online Block Teaching: A Lefebvrian Case Study. in: Nerantzi, C., Chatzidamianos, G. & Di Ciolla, N. (2021) Block teaching: challenges and opportunities. [Special Issue]. *Learning and Teaching in Action*, 14. 1-8, available at www.uta.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/

Nerantzi, C., Chatzidamianos, G. & Di Ciolla, N. (Eds). (2021). Block teaching: challenges and opportunities, [Special Issue] *Learning and Teaching in Action*. 14. available at www.uta.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/

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Academic Readiness and Collaborative Communities in Online Block Teaching: A Lefebvrian Case Study

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Abstract

My experiences and observations of online block-teaching (OBT) in Psychology at Manchester Met acted as the trigger for the present paper. For example, an insightful colleague captured the often one-sided experience of teaching online, thus: "It helps if you think of yourself as a radio presenter!" I wanted to investigate this and other observations of OBT and to this end I provide a novel application of Lefebvre's Trialectic of Space (1991). Specifically, in a recent paper we employed Lefebvre's Trialectic to understand how tutors and students use and experience the hybrid pedagogical approach of online and block teaching (Harkin & Nerantzi, in press). Lefebvre saw space not as a passive container but rather as an active arena that interacts with and produces thought and behaviour; i.e., the produced social space. The model integrated physical, mental and social space to unify the main elements of the produced space, which in spatial terms he referred to as 'Spatial Practice', 'Representations of Space' and 'Representational Space', respectively (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 40). I will outline each arm of Lefebvre's model and within each, frame and explain some of my

key observations on student's and tutor's experiences in OBT (Figure 1), and where appropriate offer recommendations for practice. The benefits of looking at the OBT space in this way was noted by Leston-Bandeira (2020) who stated that if we "consider the online space as a new space, and … online learning as a new mode of learning" then we will "start … [to get] a feel for what needs to be done to guide your student's in their learning" (p.1).

Spatial Practice and the online block teaching space

Spatial practice represents the manner in which easy access via ever-present digital devices (e.g., personal computers, mobile phones, and tablets) encourages habitual interaction with content online, for example, learning materials, checking emails (e.g., to address questions about assessments), forums, MS Teams chat, etc. Such 'digital connectivity' provides students with the advantage of being able to access course materials and workshops in any locations at any time. One spatial practice issue was that students generally kept their cameras off and did not talk during workshops. Reasons for this can be shyness, noisy home backgrounds, not wearing appropriate clothes, poor internet, and uncomfortable with the possibility of recording (Bali, 2020). When coupled with time constraints both within sessions and across blocks, this makes it even more difficult to encourage students to turn their cameras on and talk. If this does not occur then there is a danger of tutor's simply "covering content" (Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2020). To counter this tutors will likely have to reinforce the benefits of student-tutor and student-student dialogue, therein community, at the beginning of each session and/or block (see Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2020), and model good behaviours themselves in online spaces. However, a recent Internal Student Survey (ISS) on block 1 within Psychology revealed that

students did not appreciate pressure to turn their cameras on. Thus, tutors find themselves in a difficult position as they attempt to negotiate student preferences with the need to create strong learning communities.
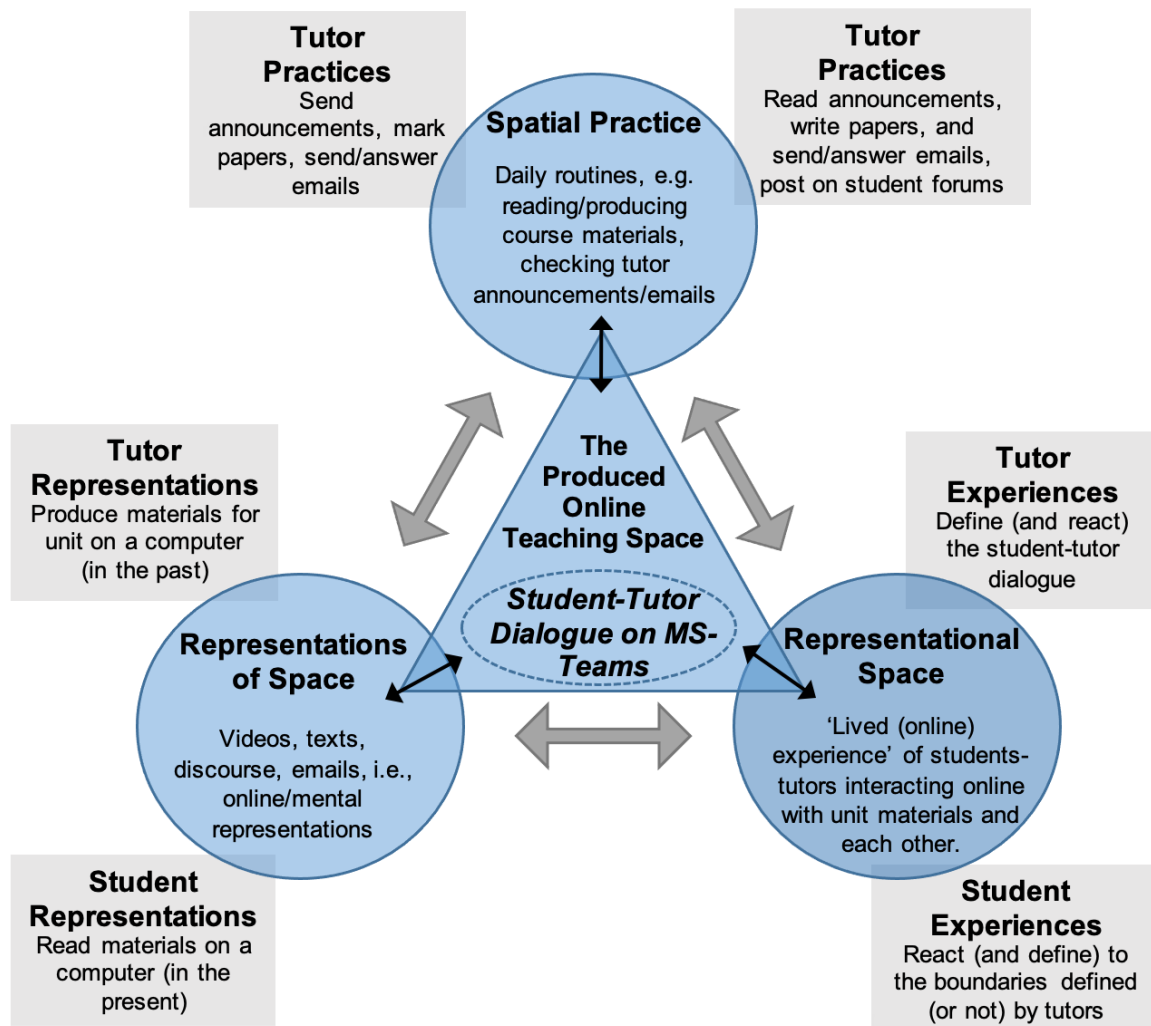
Tutor Practices
Send announcements, mark papers, send/answer emails

Tutor Practices
Read announcements, write papers, and send/answer emails, post on student forums

Spatial Practice
Daily routines, e.g. reading/producing course materials, checking tutor announcements/emails

The Produced Online Teaching Space

Student-Tutor Dialogue on MS-Teams

Tutor Representations
Produce materials for unit on a computer (in the past)

Representations of Space
Videos, texts, discourse, emails, i.e., online/mental representations

Representational Space
'Lived (online) experience' of students-tutors interacting online with unit materials and each other.

Tutor Experiences
Define (and react) the student-tutor dialogue

Student Representations
Read materials on a computer (in the present)

Student Experiences
React (and define) to the boundaries defined (or not) by tutors

Figure 1. A modified version of Lefebvre's Trialectic of Space (1991) as applied to The Produced Online Teaching Space.

Representations of space and the online block teaching space

Representations of space highlights how our mental constructions and expectations of a given space are reflected in thought, planning and grouping (Carp, 2008). In relation to the OBT space, this reflects the manner in that it shapes thinking and/or behaviours and vice versa. It explains how conflict can arise when tutors and students hold discrepant mental representations on the expected use of the OBT space. For example, issues around student engagement existed throughout the blocks this year. In that, tutors are left (due to previous issues in spatial practice) not knowing when or if a student is engaging or not. In contrast, in a face-to-face session, it is generally easier to identify engagement on the levels of physical presence, interaction, and emotional interest. Students may actually be engaged but tutors are in the unfortunate position of not having access to those usual non-verbal cues to extract this information; e.g., physical face/emotions, eye contact, body language, etc. This is important as a finding in psychology is that uncertainty leads to anxiety (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). Another issue pertains to the actual or perceived (see above) lack of 'preparedness' of students (i.e., engagement with asynchronous learning activities) as observed in a number of workshops. We are likely observing pre-existing habits in terms of academic readiness (i.e., the degree to which a student is prepared for new learning)   and perhaps even states of academic dependency that are already established in secondary school, reinforced in traditional semesterised approaches at university, which then clash with the independent learning demands of the OBT space. We support this assertion via recent ISS comments of undergraduate students (levels 4, 5, and 6) who were in first block of the online units in psychology at Manchester Met.

Specifically, they commented negatively on the amount of independent learning required in the OBT format, and preferred taught content and in-depth learning.

Representational space and the online block teaching space

Representational space relates to the 'lived', produced and reproduced experiences of space (Lefebvre, 1991). It is not experienced via purely physical properties, but rather an amalgamation of visual, verbal, and/or kinaesthetic symbolism, which we observe in pictures, writing, music, gestures, metaphors, signs or rapt attention (Carp, 2008), that evoke memories and emotions, impose social norms, and can create a strong sense of social belonging (Buser, 2012). This concurs pedagogically with experiential learning, where the student learns through doing and reflection and the tutor plays more the role of a facilitator to learning than the source of information *per se* (Suryani & Widyastuti, 2015). I propose that considerations of the representational space can potentially intervene with previous issues in encouraging readiness via the development of meaningful learning communities. This is even more meaningful when we consider previous issues identified in online teaching; i.e., lack of face-to-face interaction in live sessions, leading to uncertainty and anxiety for tutors in terms of student's actual engagement. For example, Carrillo and Flores (2020) in their review of online teaching and learning practices in response to COVID-19, identified the importance of trusting relationships, collaboration, and participation (e.g., prioritising social interaction over task completion) as key to establishing a sense of social community in OBT. Some suggestions to foster a sense of community are to spend time on socialisation activities (e.g., community building); empowering

students to lead activities (e.g., choosing topics of interest, use of break out rooms); deploy interactive technology (e.g., Padlet, quizzes); integrate problem-based learning (PBL; see Wood, 2003), to name but a few. However, as most (if not all) tutors at Man Met are already employing such strategies, it is likely that it is the degree of (in)congruence between students and tutors in the areas of spatial practice and representations of space that will determine the success of these endeavours. Independent of the method of delivery (i.e., online versus face-to-face) this perhaps identifies the need to target 'academic readiness in level four students (and induction at level 5 and 6) in terms of spatial practice (i.e., replacing directed learning with autonomous habits) and representations of space (i.e., replacing the expectation that the workshop/lecture is the sole learning event).

While the above outlines a new means to interpret student and tutor behaviours in the OBT space, there is always a danger that a theoretical exposition can appear to ignore basic pragmatic issues. For example, COVID-19 has placed tutors and students under new and unforeseen demands and pressures. I have seen colleagues going 'above and beyond' in their attempts to deliver their units this year, while they experience and quietly overcome the same stresses imposed upon them by COVID-19. Thus, it is hoped that while the present circumstances offer a challenge to us all, OBT as viewed through the present Lefebvrian analysis and your own individual experiences can potentially improve the quality of our teaching, students' engagement, depth of students' learning and the nature of student-tutor and student-student dynamics long into the future.

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